

**CHALLENGES TO DEMOCRATIZATION
IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND CENTRAL ASIA**

**Testimony by
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Oppressors vs. Reformers in the Middle East and Central Asia”**

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Madame Chairwoman and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for holding this hearing to focus on the status of democracy and human rights in the Middle East and Central Asia. This hearing provides an excellent opportunity for us to affirm our conviction that the people of these regions stand ready to benefit from democracy and liberty, and to acknowledge our support to those who aspire to build democratic institutions of their own. It is not only our moral obligation to promote democracy and respect for human rights around the world, it is a national security imperative. The National Security Strategy of the United States lists eight demands of human dignity: the rule of law, limits on the absolute power of the state, freedom of speech and freedom of worship, equal justice, respect for women, religious and ethnic tolerance and respect for private property. We know that regimes that violate the human rights of their own citizens are more likely to disrupt peace and security in their region and to create a reservoir of ill will that can accrue to the detriment of the United States. The best guarantor of security and prosperity at home and abroad is respect for individual liberty and protection of human rights through democratic governance and the rule of law.

The past year has seen a dramatic shift in the world's landscape. Elections in Afghanistan, Palestinian Authority and Iraq, and the "Orange Revolution" in Ukraine have brought the dramatic first steps of democracy to populations that have lived under tyranny and oppression for too long. Today, more than fifty million people who lived under brutal regimes in Afghanistan and Iraq are on the road to democracy, and Iraq has taken the first steps in becoming a modern democratic nation in the Arab Middle East.

As Secretary Rice said, "We recognize that each country has a unique history and traditions that will shape its quest for freedom. Whatever the path or pace, however, the U.S. is prepared to stand with those who seek freedom for themselves and their fellow citizens."

In two critical but very distinct regions – Central Asia and the greater Middle East -- we see a slow but rising tide of democracy. The democratic reformer in these lands no longer struggles in isolation to bring freedom and respect for human rights to his homeland. Faced with the broken promises of repressive regimes, seeing and hearing uncensored news for the first time through satellite television and Internet access, many have joined that call for freedom. There is a growing demand for open, fair and competitive elections, for the representative government and impartial justice ordinary citizens in these countries deserve but have long been denied. Some

governments in these regions – responding both to internal pressures for change and the links between representative democracy and sustained economic resilience and prosperity – have taken early steps toward reforms to develop and strengthen key institutions and to develop a culture of democracy and rule of law. Regrettably, other governments fail to understand that democracy is a necessary component for both long-term stability and prosperity. Those governments resist change, demonstrating that substantial challenges remain before us.

Democratization in Eurasia faces many challenges. Progress continues to be measured largely in terms of civil society development; political reform remains stalled – and some states are in fact backsliding. Across Central Asia, more and more NGOs, opposition parties and citizens are willing to organize and advocate for government accountability. Unfortunately, the response by most governments has not been to be more accountable and transparent; some governments have instead increased repression of civil society groups.

Opposition political parties across the region remain stymied in their attempts to fulfill the role of an alternative voice to government, so necessary for political pluralism. All political parties are banned in Turkmenistan, except for the party of the self-declared President-for-Life.

In Uzbekistan, opposition parties courageously continue to meet despite government harassment. They have repeatedly submitted their applications for registration, only to be denied each time. In December's parliamentary elections, no opposition candidates were permitted to run. The regime continues its attempts to restrict training in democratic political skills to the government-approved parties alone. In last year's Country Report on Human Rights Practices we noted positive steps to improve political participation taken by the Government of Kazakhstan in registering the opposition party Democratic Choice. Unfortunately that progress was negated this year when a court ruling banned the party, raising questions about due process. In another mixed signal, the Government of Kazakhstan did transfer a leading opposition leader – convicted in a trial that also lacked due process—to minimum security facilities as part of the first step toward parole. However, authorities reportedly tried to convince him to discontinue his political activities in exchange for release, and threatened to impose new criminal charges. In Tajikistan, the Government continued to deny the registration of two opposition political parties amid allegations that authorities made politically motivated arrests. February's parliamentary elections failed to meet international standards and serious irregularities were observed by the OSCE.

Independent media, another key component for a democratic society, remains equally challenged. While on paper, the constitution of every Central Asian republic provides for freedom of speech and of the press, governments in the region used a variety of means, including criminal and administrative charges, physical attacks, and vandalism to control the media. Judicial actions against journalists and media outlets, including civil and criminal libel suits filed by government officials, contributed to self-censorship and an otherwise chilling environment.

But these efforts to deny people their freedom have not always succeeded. Our hopes are high for Kyrgyzstan: the democratic breakthrough that occurred after February's flawed parliamentary elections has given the people of Kyrgyzstan a new opportunity to join the community of democratic societies. U.S. programming in Kyrgyzstan, including support for the region's only independent printing press, enabled the people of Kyrgyzstan to make their voices be heard and contributed to a vibrant civil society that demanded accountability for flawed election races. Zamira Sydykova, a leading opposition journalist, recently testified to that fact before the Helsinki Commission. In her words, U.S. support and programs "spurred on ordinary citizens to realize their role in the elections" and "imparted confidence to the [Kyrgyz] independent mass media." Now, the

United States is working closely with the OSCE, the new Government of Kyrgyzstan and the Kyrgyz civil society to ensure that the July presidential election is open and transparent and to urge that democratic reform be enshrined in Kyrgyz institutions such as the constitution, parliament, and judiciary. Likewise, the events last year in Ukraine show that media intimidation, attacks on opposition leaders, and outright vote fraud do not assure the continuity of the regime in power.

Not surprisingly, the recent striking examples of successful and peaceful democratic change have given rise to one of the greatest challenges we currently face in the region. Some government officials in Central Asia and elsewhere are drawing the wrong lessons from Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan. Instead of recognizing that governments can be threatened because of bad elections and lack of accountability to the people, these officials are seeing some USG-supported NGOs as working to undermine their governments rather than working to strengthen civil society – and a result, strengthening these nations. We are concerned whenever we hear reports of harassment of local NGOs, including our own implementing partners, who are being harassed through bureaucratic obstacles and specious legal means. U.S.-funded NGOs have been threatened with expulsion; denied visas; and confronted by hostile prosecutorial

investigations. In all of these cases, we have objected strenuously to this kind of treatment for NGOs.

We must not, however, allow these tactics to dampen our support for indigenous and peaceful reform; indeed, we must redouble our efforts and support for organizations receiving U.S. funding. These NGOs are at the frontline of implementing our committed policy to promote democracy and human rights. We will continue to fund programs designed to strengthen political parties, independent media, advocacy civil society groups, human rights defenders and rule of law. The success of the peaceful revolts against efforts to deprive people of their democratic rights in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan demonstrate the power of ordinary people armed with knowledge of their basic democratic rights.

Increased Sunni-Shi'a dialogue and inclusion of marginalized religious and ethnic groups in a national political process are critical to ensuring long term stability in the Middle East. Governments in the Middle East must provide more than lip service to the principle of religious tolerance, discarding tired excuses for repression in the name of stability or security. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in particular must end the export of religious literature that promotes extremist views and violence, move to

rapidly reform curricula that now promote bigotry and intolerance, and allow greater latitude for non-Muslims to practice their faith.

Growing regional access to independent and balanced media, whether through satellite television or the expanding Internet, can and does play a vital role in bringing democracy to these lands. Citizens once blinded by censorship now watch the brilliant cedar flags of Lebanon wave amid cheering crowds, marvel at the courage and determination of Iraqi men and women willing to lay down their lives for a chance at deciding their own future, see peaceful elections in Palestinian territories long hostage to violence and hatred. After decades in which their leaders dismissed freedom as a luxury Western import -- somehow incompatible with Muslim culture or the Arab character -- they see democracy rising. They see and wonder, why not here? Why not us?

But even progressive governments, those publicly committed to democratization such as Bahrain or Jordan or Yemen, are reluctant to fully relinquish their old barriers to freedom of expression, to tolerate open dissent or criticism of leaders or open their books to public scrutiny. Too many regimes cling to antiquated press and defamation laws that stifle the growth of a free and balanced press, protect institutionalized corruption, and allow the intimidation and arrest of journalists such as Yemeni editor Al-

Khawani or the Kuwaiti columnist Ahmed Al-Baghdadi. Egypt's long-standing Emergency Law and laws governing NGOs, political parties, and libel penalties severely limit the freedom of expression and assembly that opposition parties, civil society and the press need to play their proper role in a democracy. Moreover, criminal cases against people such as opposition politician Ayman Nour have appeared designed to intimidate independent voices. We are pressing Egypt to make good on President Mubarak's recent pledge to hold open, transparent, and competitive presidential elections, and to take its natural role as a leader in regional democratization.

The greatest internal commitment to democratization can be daunted by the immensity of the task of building a firm foundation for a democratic society. This foundation, a framework for consolidated democracy, must include a fair and efficient judicial system; security forces that protect both the State and its citizens; an active civil society that builds and sustains oversight and accountability of its governmental institutions; democratic political parties that represent the long-term interests of an engaged citizenry and foster broad participation and dialogue; and the keystone of a free press and freedom of expression. Like the United States, these governments must balance the demands of security in an increasingly dangerous world without eroding or ignoring institutional protections for human rights and civil

liberties. We have especially reminded our strategic partners in Central Asia of this need if they are to ensure long-term stability and prosperity.

It is the people of these nations – both in the Middle East and in Central Asia -- who will raise their own flags of peaceful revolution in the years to come, who will slowly and carefully build their own distinct democracies. It is their governments that must respond to legitimate demands for change while preserving security and providing a stable environment for economic growth and opportunity. The United States can help our friends meet these challenges. In some cases, it may be through continued diplomatic dialogue or through quiet outreach that promotes full democratic inclusion and enhanced treatment of marginalized populations. Targeted U.S. assistance and exchange programs already work to strengthen judicial systems in Bahrain, to mobilize women in Jordan and the Occupied Territories, to provide information and professional training to journalists and politicians and entrepreneurs and jurists, to promote increased religious tolerance and understanding. In Central Asia, U.S. assistance has led to some positive steps to address torture and other law enforcement abuse in Uzbekistan; the U.S. is providing Kazakhstan with technical assistance to support the implementation of jury trials; and across the region, governments are now actively combating trafficking in persons.

The United States also works with multilateral organizations such as the OSCE and the United Nations and other donor nations to recognize and support legitimate internal demands for inclusion of women and marginalized populations and their full political and economic participation, to help heal long-standing religious and tribal divisions that foster religious hatreds and sectarian strife, to promote peaceful and positive reforms respecting religion and universal human rights and amplifying the voices of politically moderate religious and community leaders, and to help reformist governments build a better future for their citizens.

I would like to close with the remarks that President Bush gave recently when he welcomed to the White House the Iraqi Transitional National Assembly. “It is the policy of the United State to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world. Today, people in a long-troubled part of the world are standing up for their freedom....The trend is clear: Freedom is on the march. Freedom is the birthright and deep desire of every human soul, and spreading freedom's blessings is the calling of our time. And when freedom and democracy take root in the Middle East, America and the world will be safer and more peaceful.” Madame Chairwoman, I’d be happy to take your questions.